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Political savvy was missing

There is one thing that the following people have in common, in addition to gender: Lt. Col. Oliver North, Robert McFarlane, Rear Adm. John Poindexter, Donald Regan, George Shultz, Caspar Weinberger, and practically everybody else who knew a lot or a little about the Strategic Iranian Initiative or SII.

Not one of them was a politician. Not one of them had ever run or ever been elected to public office. Not one of them had ever had to answer for their actions to a popular constituency. Not one had ever come close to a voter except a relative.

The only politicians in this entire mess were President Reagan and Vice President George Bush. But they forgot the first principles of politics, let alone of covert action. It was a politician who once said: "we should not do secretly anything that we would not be proud to defend publicly."

The man who uttered that bit of wisdom was Republican Sen. Malcolm Wallop of Wyoming.

There was nothing morally reprehensible in seeking an opening to Iran. What was stupid was allowing a bunch of people who understood little about politics (let alone Iranian or Soviet politics) and knew even less about public opinion to play at secret diplomacy which, even if it all went well, would have had a minuscule chance of success. In other words, the Poindexter-North combo ran an operation which when exposed to daylight made the actors look like a bunch of burglars and the president the burglar-in-chief.

SII was the trivialization of foreign policy. In fact, SII was foreign adventurism, not foreign policy. Seeking freedom for hostages is laudable benevolence, not realpolitik. As for Col. North, he was a sort of conservative Che Guevara. Mr. Guevara thrashed about in a Bolivian jungle until his death. Col. North played hide-and-seek in a Persian marketplace and managed to come out of his adventure in one piece.

What would a politician know that

the above-mentioned didn't know? And why am I including in the list of non-politicians Messrs. Shultz and Weinberger, secretary of state and defense, respectively? Had the two Cabinet officers understood the American political process, they would together or singly have gone to Mr. Reagan and said that, unless this SII were taken out of the hands of the amateur brigade or it was called off, they would resign.

In the face of such a Cabinet revolt, I don't know what the president would have done. But a seasoned politician would have realized that Washington is no place to keep a secret and that it would leak somewhere, if not the nation's capital then somewhere else. Messrs. Weinberger and Shultz did Mr. Reagan no service by staying on and pretending that nothing was happening.

The first exception to my thesis about politicians is Mr. Bush. Here's a man who has run successfully for elective office, has been head of the CIA, ambassador to China, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, chairman of the Republican National Committee, a candidate for president and still a candidate. How could he have flopped so badly?

The second exception to my thesis is William Casey, the former CIA director. He was a semipolitician, he had run for Congress a long time ago, he had been Mr. Reagan's campaign manager in 1980. How he screwed up is a mystery which probably will never be solved. Perhaps, he was the loyal liege man willing to serve his sovereign.

What does a politician know that the amateur does not know? The politician knows that it is not necessarily true that the shortest distance is a straight line between two points. In fact, in politics it is frequently the longest way around.

The seasoned politician also knows that anything that looks easy is going to turn out to be difficult, otherwise it would have been done long ago. He also knows that if there's a particularly sticky problem like voting on a controversial bill, find some way around the obstacle by defusing the bill in such a way that only the U.S. Supreme Court could interpret the meaning if the bill were enacted into law.

And above all the politician knows that most socioeconomic problems cannot be cured overnight because legislative solutions usually create far greater complications than the original problem. When the temper-

ance advocates pushed through Prohibition did they ever imagine that they would help unleash the greatest wave of criminality and gangsterism in our history? How many people envisioned that World War II would end up with Central Europe a victim of Soviet thralldom?

A successful politician may be a trimmer, a compromiser, the man who ducks problems and always thinks of protecting his vulnerable bottom. Better he than the failed politician-turned-statesman, the elected official who begins to think of himself as a miracle-worker; e.g., Richard M. Nixon. It may have been House Speaker Thomas B. Read who succinctly defined a statesman as "a dead politician."

Proof of my thesis? Who's being called upon to rescue the ship of state? Politician Howard Baker, politician John Tower, politician Edmund Muskie, politician Paul Laxalt, and, for my money, politician Malcolm Wallop. No statesmen they.

Last, admittedly politicians are not nature's noblemen. Yet with all their foofkeeying around with salary grabs and \$10,000 breakfasts they're a lot safer to have around than the types who have helped get the country into the kind of mess which will be a long time with us.